

The Last Summer

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"I'll shout. Promise."

"Shout?" I don't think I've heard Prim shout. "Lucky me," I said. Even if it felt hollow.

Prim grimaced in pity, as if he knew. "Right, the true luck, hearing my dumb voice."

The summer breeze eased around us, as the dry grass weaved to the sounds of cicadas, and the late dandelion seeds spun into the sunset.

"So, are you going to shout *on* the phone or just when it rings?"

"The entire duration of the phone call, the packing, the goodbyes and of the flight, Kass."

I smiled. "Please record all that."

"My phone'll run out of battery, I'm afraid."

"I'll buy you a power bank if that's what it takes."

"I have one," he said. "Somewhere."

I almost said the obvious, but instead I just raised an eyebrow.

"You know, it might be best. If you got me one. Actually."

I tried to hold the grimace. I tried.

"No, but like, it's even worse than you think," he continued. "It's at my parent's but I might've left it in their garage. With my old Xbox."

"Oh," I said.

His parents' garage flooded a year back. The entire road had already moved, but they'd kept the place for storage. But the flood came four months early. I remember the pictures they sent him. We couldn't see the roof.

"It's fine," he said. "Wasn't using the Xbox anyway. The weather can take that, if it wants."

I didn't reply. It had the right amount of weight to it.

I still had to decide what we wanted to do for the rest of the day. He'd picked yesterday, so it was only right. The problem was I couldn't exactly pick what I wanted to do most. Which was to sabotage his flight.

The sun wasn't setting at its most beautiful. We'd gotten better sunsets. This one had both too many clouds that covered the sun and not enough for the light to bounce off. And we hadn't bothered to walk all up the hill so there were some birches in the way, causing commotion in the air. It was still too hot to think and the wind only brought in the seaweed smells.

"Have you thought about what to say to them?" I said, on the way back. "Your parents. When you come."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't seen each other in 16 months."

"We spoke with them yesterday."

"No, but like, being there is a different thing. What you'll do with them, I guess. What you'll do... in general."

He gave it some thought. The pathway turned around a corner, as we crossed the once-a-car-bridge over a highway. A few bikes strolled across the centre of it, when they weren't corralled by the rare, silent transit bus.

"I don't know yet. I'll know when I get there. It'll be like old times."

I nodded. Like old times.

I was happy when we heard Prim couldn't go home. I know it makes me sound evil, I know. But come on, I got to spend an extra year and change with my best friend. Is that so wrong? It was a drab Wednesday afternoon, the kind of day where you hadn't seen the sun in months, the kind of day without change, the kind of day that is extraordinary today. He was here on a trip, visiting me for a few days, staying at my parents' with me, in their two-bedroom flat in the southern part of town, in the new-age box buildings built after the storm. Prim cried when we watched the news, when he called them on the phone to confirm, when he called the embassy, who was understaffed and overflowed, to confirm again that no, no more flights for the foreseeable future. And of course, I was sad for him. I was sad with him, even. But a part of me was also happy I got to see him more. Had he been home when this happened, I'd never gotten to see him again.

...I know it's still bad. But he's going home now, it'll fix itself. Right? It's fine.

Over canned-tuna-dinner, dad wanted to discuss the news that one of the plastic islands had been eradicated. There was only just enough space to squeeze us in, so that'd improve when Prim left. We could drag the extra chair out of the kitchen, meaning we would be able to move around the table. Dad was furious they hadn't mentioned that the other islands had just gotten bigger in the meantime. I might get slightly larger portions, too. It'd make it easier on mom.

The topic changed into what was required to make something a plastic island, and we decided we were already living on one.

All in all, an average family dinner.

After, I decided Prim and I should play a card game. I had a deck rustling around in my brain, and a new strategy to test out, so I spent a quick ten minutes rummaging through our cards to find the correct 40 to stack together, shuffled them and put it in front of him. He used one of his old ones—a staple of our play, a true classic. We'd seen it in an online tournament, but we didn't have all the cards to make it identical, so he'd improvised some key components.

The first few turns went as planned, but I already began seeing shortcomings in my deck around turn 4. His deck was strongest at exhausting the opponent, slowly drying me out of options. But my deck was made to refill its own tanks, so maybe I could outlast even that. Turn 9 was almost a disaster, but I scraped by until turn 13, where it looked like a comeback, but he pulled a tight victory off at turn 15.

It was a good game. One to remember, and one that I felt proud of, even if I lost. I wrapped the deck up and put it in the top of the box and left it, dangling on top of the shelf, where it was too large to fit.

Lying in bed, we checked our phones a bit and shared an occasional gif or funny text. It was warm, it was going to stay warm for the next months, so we only slept with

blankets. He still slept on the floor, and kept folding up the bed every day (that's the floor we played on, after all), and every time he did so, I wondered if he hoped this was the last time.

The phone call could come any day. The last we'd heard was that it was sometime this month, a month we were now two weeks into. The phone call would tell him to go to the airport the next day, pack as little as possible and then leave on the last flight he'd ever be on in his entire life. I was never going to fly again. It was a weird thought. I had flown a lot as a kid. My father had been traveling a lot, and we followed him. And when he wasn't on business, we went on trips. To cities, to London, Paris, San Francisco, to Beijing, to country sides in Toscana and Hokkaido. Now, all I would get to see was the same skyline, hear the sounds of the same four houses plastered against ours, smell the same seaweed. We could take trains, but mom had ruled it out as a possibility for the next few years: Way too crowded for her. And I couldn't visit Prim anyway—trains still could not travel over water.

I read an article about what they were going to do with all the grounded planes (some, turn to scraps, some, repurpose into other vehicles, some, destroy), and that didn't help me feel much better.

Ships? Hah. No, no ships. Not after the oil-slip on the coast.

The next day I walked in on Prim folding a shirt and slotting it neatly into a suitcase.

"Packing already?" I said.

"Yeah. The call could come today."

"Or two weeks from now."

He paused and looked at me. "Or tomorrow."

"But if it doesn't, you'll have to unpack all the clothes when you need them, won't you?"

"I have enough for two weeks."

I looked at his remnant pile of clothes and it did not look like enough for two weeks.

"I'm not sure I could live in a briefcase," I said.

"You pack faster than I do."

He'd only packed clothes. Didn't make sense to pack much else. It wouldn't get across the border. I tried to think of anything else to say. Some way to get him out of it. "You wanna go down to the ravine? I hear they're CO trapping today."

"Nah," he said.

"How about to the beach again? We can check if the salvage has filled up. That oughta be soon."

He didn't answer, instead folded a last shirt and closed his suitcase. I went in and sat on the bed, next to it. "Or we could stay here?"

He looked as if he was about to move again, to look away. But he stopped himself.

"I'm sorry, Kass. But I just want to go home."

Air went out of me.

"Well, I can't help you with that."

He shook his head, first in resignation, then in apathy. "No, I know. I'm sorry. I'm not... I don't feel great today." He picked himself up and looked at the door. "I'm going for a walk."

He was halfway out when I called his name again. He stopped, reserved. I could see his pose guarding itself already.

“You forgot your phone,” I said, handing it to him. It had been lying on the bedframe.
“You know, if they...” I said, but he went and picked it from my hand.
“Thanks.”

I went to the kitchen, and pretended to read the tablet for news. Mom was there, kneading dough in a big bowl for rye bread, her hands digging into it like it meant something.

“You okay, honey?” she said. She didn’t look. “Where’s Prim?”

“He went for a walk.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

She did a last push and pulled the doughed fingers out of the bowl and looked at me. I tried to avoid her gaze.

“I see,” she said, rinsed and washed her fingers and sat down next to me. I could still smell it on her.

“It’s getting close, huh?” she said.

“I just feel ungrateful,” I said. “And I feel awful about it. Like, we got 16 extra months we weren’t supposed to. I should feel lucky.”

She smiled a gracious smile. A proud smile. “Don’t feel bad for wanting more of a good thing. But know that endings—

“—aren’t the end, yeah, yeah,” I interrupted.

“You can still talk. You can still play online. You don’t have to drift apart.”

I shuffled my hands. I grimaced.

“Will it be the same? No,” she said. “But that’s the way things go. You’re an amazing kid and so is Prim. You’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t...” I said, unsure what to say. No unsure if I wanted to say it. “I don’t doubt that. But I don’t like that we have to.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s very understandable. I don’t like it either. I wish you could go to visit him. I wish he could visit us. I wish we could travel again. But that’s not how the world went.”

“No, you got a lifetime of travel and we get one trip.”

“Yeah,” she said, pausing. “I’m sorry.”

My eyes couldn’t rest on anything. I just browsed the kitchen.

“It’s all our fault,” she said. Her eyes were resonant. “We fucked up the world and you have to pay for it.”

“The way our history teacher told it, the generation before yours did the fucking up more than you.”

She chuckled. “That may be. But if you want to blame anyone, blame us.”

Prim came home an hour later. With a rattled look on his face. He stood in the doorway for a while before we picked up on it. Me and mom looked at the same time.

His eyes fled between us.

“Th—th... They called,” he said. “12:45 tomorrow. B-be there 2 hours early.”

He wasn’t smiling. He was shook. I felt the stab of shock, the anguish of it too, but there was also something else. A warmth, a close-knit smile that unfolded inside me.

I ran up to hug him, threw myself on him, dug my shoulders around him, and let them sit.

"You get to see your parents," I said, finally. The water in my eyes meant I meant it. I was happy. For myself, not the least.

"I thought you were jealous?" he said.

"Fuck jealousy." Let me be happy for you while I can.

The happiness lasted for the next couple of hours. Dad bought cake in celebration on his way home as Prim was calling his parents, tears once again welling up on the phone in between the practicalities of how and when they could pick him up from the airport. He packed what he hadn't already, and we divvied up games and toys and what little else we had shared. I kept most of it, he didn't have space for much anyway, but it didn't feel right to keep it all when he'd bought some of it.

The happiness lasted until he'd packed and I realized what I was left with. There were another two weeks left in the month, where I was alone, and then school would start again. School without Prim. School without the only close friend I had.

The night before, I lay, staring into the ceiling. We'd turned off the lights, but neither of us were asleep yet but we hadn't spoken much. Maybe it had finally hit Prim that this was the last time he put out the mattress, maybe I was afraid to have the last conversation be a fight. So instead I said the only thing I could think of.

"I... I didn't see you shouting," I said.

"What?"

"You said you'd shout. When you got the phone call."

There was silence for a bit. And then he shouted, at the top of his lungs, loud, loud enough to wake the neighbour's dog, loud enough to make me laugh and to make my ears hurt. He began laughing too and, in our laughing fit, we heard footsteps in the hall. A knock.

"You okay?" Dad's voice asked.

"Oh shit," we chuckled. I tried to breathe, my stomach cramping. I tried to whisper loud enough for him to hear. "Sorry dad!"

"You're good?"

"We're good."

"Ok, sleep tight."

He left the door and we finished laughing and fell into silence again and I continued to stare into the ceiling and repeated the words in my head.

We're good.

I woke to rustling, to confused shakes and mumbling, to muffled, panicked cries and then a big push.

"Wake up dummy, I can't find it!"

"Wh.." was all I managed to say before he began peeling up my mattress, pushing me away, to look under it.

"Shit. Shit shit."

I tried to get up. "What are you looking for?"

"My passport."

I blinked. I tried to make sense of it and maybe blurted out sounds that failed to become words.

He gave up looking under my bed and tossed his arms aside.

"It's in the..." I began, and hesitated. I remembered yesterday, giving him the phone. I could not tell him where it was. I could delay it long enough for him to miss his flight. Maybe. His one flight.

He turned against the shelf and knocked over the card box with an elbow, flipping it upside down, toppling it around. All the cards fluttered out on the floor. We both stared at it for a bit. He seemed more surprised than me. Any deck we had ever made was mixed in with all the others. He sighed and continued searching. "Sorry."

I rubbed my eyes and spoke. "It's in the... remember you gave it to my mom? She put it in the safe."

"Oh fuck right. But didn't I take it out?" he said and ran out the room in underwear, bare feet sliding on the concrete floor.

I lay down in the bed again, and felt remorse, then anger over feeling remorse.

I heard muffled talk through the wall that was at first concerned but eventually softened into calm. I put the pillow on my face and wanted to scream.

They call it the Rectification Flight. We all got one. One last flight to where we wanted to be for the rest of our lives. One last waste of fuel.

When I had looked up what rectification meant it said, "putting something right that is wrong".

It was wrong that Prim was not able to see his family. But it was going to be wrong that I couldn't see Prim. I wondered who'd come up with that name. And if they were right. How everyone else liked it. If it was normal to find it messed up.

The process had been gruelling, phone calls after phone calls, waiting lists, emails, forms, visits to embassies, documentation from both parties, signing of documents, phone calls, more waiting lists.

As we all went into a bus that smelled of sweat and old clothes, crammed in between an old couple and a group of loud, rich friends, stacks of luggage on row against the seats, I tried to list all the things Prim had done to get where he was now, to where he was going home. Finally.

He looked nervous; afraid, even. He had one suitcase, packed to the brim, and his tiny backpack from school, without any school books. He was going to have to start in a new school. He was going to make new friends.

"Sorry about the mess I made in your room," he said.

I chuckled. "Don't worry about it," I said. "I'm going to send you pictures and have you place each card where it was supposed to be."

He smiled. "I'm going to miss you, Kass. You know that, right?"

I nodded slowly.

How the fuck would I live with myself if I didn't let him leave?

I looked at my mom and decided that I was going to follow her words. I was going to blame them.